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Taiwan Turnabout

The 11-part telegram from the State Department that rattled across the continent after Christmas to a vacationing president in California helps answer this perplexing question: why did Ronald Reagan reverse decades of personal conviction and turn down advanced weapons for Taiwan?

The message climaxed months of advice to President Reagan from the national-security bureaucracy that selling Taiwan up-to-date warplanes for defensive purposes would risk a rupture of U.S. relations with Communist China. The telegram reiterated a warning, by now familiar to Reagan, that such sales might topple Deng Xiaoping and substitute an anti-American faction.

It is hard enough for Reagan to dispute experts on tax policy, an area where he has unusual confidence and personal experience. It was nearly impossible for this foreign policy novice to confront unified expert opinion in his administration that warned of ruinous consequences should the Washington-Peking connection be severed. By the time the president returned to the White House for a Jan. 7 National Security Council meeting, he had decided he must disappoint his old friends and foremost political cadres.

The decision concluded a virtuoso bureaucratic performance by Secretary of State Alexander Haig, who timed his move through a narrow window, with Congress out of session and no dissent on the NSC staff thanks to the fall of Richard V. Allen. But beyond Haig's skill, Reagan's reversal again shows the tenacity of the permanent government in maintaining policy even against a doctrinaire president bent on change.

As a candidate, Reagan certainly was bent on changing Taiwan policy. He was sympathetic to the island's plight generally and its specific need for an around-the clock adverse-weather plane to deter the giant neighbor across the Taiwan Strait.

After the election, the new China hands who had designed Jimmy Carter's policy stayed on the job. Charles Freeman, head of the State Department's China desk under President Carter, was chargé d'affaires in Peking. His reports went to his old colleagues on the China desk, including his former deputy, Scott Hallford. Freeman's reporting built the predictable case against advanced arms for Taiwan.

That helped shape reports by the CIA and Defense Intelligence Agency warning of dire consequences should Taiwan gets its arms. For example, a secret intelligence document last Oct. 22 on "the military situation in the Taiwan Strait" warned: "Sale of advanced weapons such as FX fighter or Harpoon missile to Taiwan would be perceived in Beijing [Peking] as part of a U.S. policy that obstructs reunification [with Taiwan]. PRC [People's Republic of China] would react strongly—probably by downgrading U.S. relations, cancelling or curtailing cooperative ventures and being more bellicose to Taiwan."

A closely held CIA report went further. The weapons sale could mean the fall of Deng, which might bring reconciliation with Moscow. Allen, then NSC director, so bitterly disagreed that he privately called the CIA reports "disinformation, or at least misinformation." Haig began to complain that Allen was making trouble about Taiwan.

Reagan himself was making trouble, to judge from his conversations with Republican members of Congress—including Sen. Jesse Helms. When Helms agreed to drop objections to a U.S.-Chinese consular treaty, he got the impression that Reagan would sell the FX aircraft to Taiwan.

But with Allen at political death's door in December, Haig moved quickly. He got agreement from Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger that more than 40 Soviet divisions pinned down by China on the Sino-Soviet border made the Peking connection vital. CIA Director William Casey also backed Haig. With the NSC's directorship and Far Eastern desk temporarily unfilled, there was no rebuttal. That long telegram sent to California noted that Congress was not in session—an implicit suggestion that the time to strike had arrived.

The one dissident was presidential counselor Edwin Meese. No more comfortable in foreign policy than his chief, Meese could not begin to refute the combined wisdom of State, Defense and the intelligence community. Neither could Reagan.

William P. Clark, newly brought in to replace Allen, was silent. Thus, at the Jan. 7 NSC meeting, nobody made the opposite case: that China, now as historically, will do what is in its best interests, whatever the kowtowing from Washington; that those troops on the Soviet border are there to protect China, not the United States; that Peking's refusal to say one word on Poland proves the absence of a U.S.-Chinese entente.

Politicians at the White House, surprised by the president's decision, were a little disturbed by the fact that the loudest hand-clapping over the announcement was from Rep. Stephen J. Solarz of New York, an anti-Reagan liberal Democrat. A devastated Jesse Helms told Clark that he no longer could count on him to support the administration on economic questions. That warning hints at perils for a president who risks alienation of his true constitutency when he and his Cabinet follow the guidance of the permanent government.